

JNU Presentation
"Engendering Performing Arts"

The Case for an Aesthetics of Hybridity

I begin with some definitions in the interests of clarity. Culture is related to knowledge and knowledge making; and Art is a particular perspective of knowledge. How we create knowledge, what processes we use, which sources we go to, will influence how we generate an Arts Practice.

Post 1947 there were two alternative sources for the making of knowledge, culture, art and aesthetics.

The first of these came out of a paradox which followed independence. Although India was free, Europe remained its cultural metropolis. Foundational cultural, economic and political thought in the new India came out of Western Epistemology. These concealed colonial habits of knowledge and value pointed towards a derivative culture, which insidiously and constantly needed to address the West. More seriously other processes of knowing and alternative knowledge systems were excluded from the cultural mainstream as Western rationality and its universalism allows no space for 'difference' and 'otherness'.

The second alternative looked to provide a cultural stability and identity to the new nation state through the resurrection of an authentic Tradition. Through an act of historical amnesia regarding the intermediate colonial past, an authentic, pure, essential and distinctive Indian culture was nostalgically conjured up. But this dream of discontinuity suppresses unresolved problems related to subordination and prolongs the recovery period from the disease of colonization. And however much we may deplore some of the characteristics that colonialism has produced, or try to move back to an 'Indian' way of seeing existence, we cannot get rid of a certain element of inevitable change, any more than one can go back in life to what one was a few years ago and recover a past mentality in its entirety.

Both these alternatives in their extreme were authoritarian and deadly as they discouraged the habits of 'new creativity' and reinforced conformity to orthodoxy. Even the West has colluded in the project of Traditional India. For the native must continue to be available as the pure unadulterated object of Orientalist inquiry. And the privileges of Contemporariness must be reserved only for the liberal West, relegating all other cultures to the real and imagined wasteland of nativism, culturalism and purism. How else would the West define its exclusive identity?

When I took one of my productions to New York recently, the audience did not fill the hall on the first day. We had described ourselves as a contemporary theatre company. What contemporary work can emerge out of India/ Asia? In the Q&A which followed the second day's performance, which incidentally was attended by a larger audience, the

questions were begging for a response which would show us up as a traditional theatre company. The actor Vinay Kumar, when asked which part of his classical training had helped him in creating certain characters for that performance answered “Tom and Jerry!” There was a disappointed silence.

Fortunately a third alternative for knowledge making has emerged out of the world we occupy today. This is the notion of hybridity, which opens up an in-between-space of cultural ambivalence. Hybridity is essentially opposed to the idea of purity and the authenticity of origins. And it transgresses the confinement of both metropolitan and provincial orthodoxies. It is oppositional to the racialism and authoritarianism that attends both cultural essentialism and colonial rationality and provides for a pluralistic culture.

Hybridity is the child of the globalization of cultures and extra or post-national solidarities.

Where once the idea of human unity relied on, and so reinforced, the binding effects of external boundaries (national, cultural, religious, racial), it is now increasingly being founded, rather more meaningfully, on the subtle interconnectedness between disparate peoples, localities, knowledges. And where the idea of external unity often tended (and continues to do so in virulent forms of cultural nationalism) to level out the differences between individuals and knowledge systems, the idea of interconnectedness privileges communication over homogeneity.

An art/aesthetic practice emerging out of a recognition of such an interconnectedness would resonate with a generous pluralism of knowledge and thought. It would be the outcome of dialogues between diverse cultures, regions and diverse realms. Indeed the *bridging* potential of such a practice has a great deal to offer the new and incipient politics of interconnection.

I believe too that the metaphor of the bridge provides a powerful counterpoint to the malaise of homogeneity which attends globalization: for the bridge is a quintessentially ‘mixed’ space, a place of traffic and perpetual transition. It is as well a place that does not require either participant in a creative interchange to cross over to the other side. Rather, its interest is in the confusions, misunderstandings, ellipses and errors, which occur in any conversation across languages and/or idioms.

It is in such spaces that ‘newness’ enters the world. And it is with the creation and fostering of such spaces that our aesthetic ought to concern itself.

Indeed contemporariness finds resonance in the pluralism of hybridity. For what else is it but the mind’s newly acquired ability to take in more viewpoints than one—simultaneously. Its multiple sightedness.

What then are the processes of knowledge-making that present themselves to us in such a world?

Interacting with ‘difference’ seems to be the key for the creation of new thought and creativity. For the shock of the impact is stimulating. I quote Sri Aurobindo here from His Foundations of Indian Culture. “Mentally, Vitality and Physically I do not grow by a pure self-development from within, in a virgin isolation. There is in every individualized existence a double action, a self development from within which is its greatest intimate power of being and by which it is itself-- and a reception of impacts from outside, which it has to accommodate to its own individuality and make it into material of self- growth and self- power.” He continues “—the external impact may act as an irritant —and then there is a struggle, an impulse and a process of rejection—but even in this struggle---the energies of the being are stimulated and helped.” He goes on to say that the impact may also stimulate---- “by comparison, by knocking at locked doors and arousing slumbering energies. It may come in as possible material which then has to be reshaped --- reinterpreted in the light of” the receivers “ own characteristics. In a great change of environment or a close meeting with a mass of invading influences all these processes work together and there is possibly much temporary perplexity and difficulty, many doubtful and perilous movements, but also opportunity of a great self- developing transformation or an immense and vigorous renaissance.” Productive interaction with ‘difference, it is suggested is the result not of accretion but of the assimilation of external impact, which is then reshaped according to the psychological need of the receiver. And it seems obvious that we are being urged to consider the invisible elements and indeed the invisible processes which attend such interaction. I mention this specifically here because frequently in staged dialogues between idioms and languages the external form becomes the focus of the interaction.

Hybridity then is not a place of admixture and a patchwork of discrete forms; a manipulated putting together of a bundle of many things. It is a space on the contrary where many influences and perspectives come in to feed an outlook; to increase and widen the resonance of concepts, ideas, idioms and forms; a space, which allows for truly large responses to existing cultural forms and values, rather than repetitive imitations of them.

‘Difference’ attends not only the processes of knowledge making but as well the processes of knowing. Dr. Leela Gandhi in Postcolonial Theory gestures towards the distinction between the ‘finitude of the thinking rational subject and the infinite variety of the world.’ We must admit onto our bridge therefore ways of knowing, which are not only a part of the metropolitan discourse but also of alterity. Such could include for instance, self realization, faith and inspiration. These are important because they constitute a powerful bridge between human experience and spiritual realities; between the empirical components of everyday life, on the one hand, and those of the unseen /unthought regions of the mind.

I mention these categories in this paper, because they provide to my mind the element of rootedness in a world of invading forces; a rootedness within the heart of cosmopolitanism. As the space from which they come constitutes as Sri Aurobindo says the ‘intimate power of being -- by which it is itself.’

Coming back to the ways of knowing. The story of Eklavya, in my opinion celebrates the acquiring of knowledge without the intervention of an external agency. The pedagogical value of this process I believe inspired the traditional guru to withhold many secrets of her/his knowledge so as to inveigle the student to discover them for herself/himself in the process of the long years of repetition during training. The knowledge which emerges from this process is profounder, more complete and empowering than that which is imparted by an outside force.

In a similar register is the matter of faith. Not to be confused with 'belief' and devotionalism -- faith is that which precede(s) knowledge', giving a 'glimpse of a truth which the mind has not yet seized as knowledge'. Faith is akin to Intuition and anticipates Inspiration.

We refer to inspiration as though it is something, which comes to us from outside ourselves, from a space, which is other than what we are in everyday life. In the intense need to find solutions to creative problems, one sometimes makes great leaps into spaces of oneself, which exist beyond those of daily existence. These are leaps into a potential of ourselves, which at that moment seems beyond us. The 'colonization' of our potential or possibility through the thrust for inspiration therefore results in the widening and enhancing of the boundaries of our consciousness beyond those which we experience in every day life.

Indeed I privilege this entire category of the processes of knowing precisely because they contribute towards the heightening of consciousness. The value of performance/art lies in its ability to elevate or to create a state of 'ecstasy' in the mind of the spectator. And the uplifting power of art is inherent in its nature, for art is itself the expression of a heightened consciousness.

In the Koodiyattam tradition of performance there is a practice, by which each emotion is stimulated by a particular pattern of breath. The breath for the generation of Sringara requires the filling up of the lungs with breath slowly just as a bucket is filled up slowly by a tap releasing water drop by drop. When the breath energy reaches its maximum it is allowed to push against the top of the head and the practitioner seems to experience a great sense of expansion beyond limits. (Demonstration of Usha's Sringara where she explains.)

This breath approximates physically the psychological intensity, heightening, enhancement and ecstasy I am referring to. The way I see it then is that Sringara in its largest sense expresses an enhancement and heightening of consciousness. Like mystical ecstasy it has an aspirational element which anticipates inspiration. And inspiration because it comes from a space which is not of the present moment but out of a potential or a possibility of our self has a visionary implication.

Both artists and mystics, a category which depend on inspiration for knowledge, are known to have anticipated the future. They have been forerunners of the future. I quote John Russell the art critic who says: "There is in art a clairvoyance for which we have not

yet found a name, and still less an explanation.” And Robert Hughes: “The essence of the avant garde myth is that the artist is a precursor; the truly significant work of art is the one that prepares the future. The transitional focus of culture, on the other hand, tends to treat the present {the living artist} as the culmination of the past.”

In all times revolutionary art has served this function of preparing the future. The revolutions in Space /Time/ Light happened first in painting in the mid -nineteenth century before neo physics through the theory of relativity and the quantum theory, in the first quarter of the twentieth century changed the material life of humanity with lasers, computers, space probes, transistors, and nuclear energy. The revolutionary thought regarding social behavior in South Asia in the 19th century was anticipated by the poets and mystics of the Bhakti tradition from the early 7th century well into the 16th century.

My purpose in this discussion is twofold: To defend the seminal creative importance of such non metropolitan processes of knowing as inspiration. And to widen the understanding of Sringara and its relationship to inspiration. Traditionally too Sringara was known as the rasa raja, without the experience of which no other emotional expression was possible.

In its current interpretations Sringara is seen as a disabling and disempowering expression in performance. That is because we choose to inherit only the historical vehicle of its expression. The romantic and erotic love stories surrounding Krishna and his women.

The spiritual and creative out put of the bhakti mystics resulted from a heightened state and ecstasy of being. The vehicle of their expression was erotic and romantic love. I believe that they used this as a metaphor for their state of being. The experience of human love is the closest experience in everyday life to the sharpness, intensity, heightening of consciousness and creative wideness of the mystical experience of ecstasy. We don't necessarily have to dispense with this category of experience, while we discard or transform old ways of communicating the idea.

Sringara in my view is the aspirational impulse to go beyond the banality of everyday reality. And the struggle to go beyond the everyday in a process of continuous becoming creates a vibrating, energized persona, which reaches out to the spectator and touches him/her through a contagion of consciousness.

In live performance practice the enhancement of consciousness is not restricted to the psychological domain. It includes the body. For consciousness exists also in the body. It expresses itself as energy. And it is with this enhanced energy that a performer can impact the spectator.

The daily, functional use of the body occurs without reflection or choice. It is stereotyped and executed unconsciously. The more our actions are carried out spontaneously, without the least difficulty, the more can attention be directed to something else. But this spells

death for body consciousness, for this spontaneity is a conditioned reflex. If one wants to free oneself from reflexive response, one must fight against the spontaneous and the natural in the body. One must initiate a process, which undermines automatism, by using the body in a different way: by relearning how to stand, by using a different balance axis, by moving according to rules which deny those of daily behavior. This will call for a constant awareness in the body.

Only by using the body in a non-functional way, is the consciousness in the body stimulated to take on a more active role, thus displacing automatism and accomplishing the mutation of inertia into energy, of weight into lightness.

This attempt to release the consciousness in the body has enormous implications for live performance practice. For one has to constantly recreate new languages for the body as very soon the body converts all behavior even non automatistic ones into automatisms.

In the next part of this paper I discuss some of my work in the context of the concerns mentioned above. This will involve a specific reference to two of my latest theatre performances. One is *Brhannala*, which premiered in 1997. The other *Ganapati*, which premiered in 2000.

At the outset I would like to mention two things. The verbal language that I work with in performance is predominantly English with a mix of other Indian languages. While not denying myself the metropolitan power of communication my intention is to use English in the way Indians do with the cadences and tempo of Indian speech. This appropriation of the language I believe is a kind of 'subversion from within'. For the way the English is used challenges the accepted linguistic appropriateness of it by twisting it around.

Secondly much of my theatre work has been the result of engaging in dialogues between different times (Traditional/ Contemporary) different cultures and spaces, different genres etc.

Brhannala came out of a dialogue with Koodiyattam and its techniques of breath. Many years later this dialogue expanded to include a Noh practitioner with the aim of sharing techniques of breath in Noh performance. But along with this specific goal other realizations emerged. I understood thereafter the need for the disclosure and revitalization of traditions of pluralism native to Asia and to its complex network of neighboring, adjacent and contiguous cultures. For the dialogue itself drew attention to the deep but long occluded histories of exchange, communication and creative interaction between these cultures.

Indeed Asian arts are stricken by the malady of 'purism'; a residual effect of the cultural nationalism provoked, first, by the experience of European colonialism and, second, in reaction to the threat of homogenization that attends globalization. Thus in endlessly addressing a putative 'West' (reactively or otherwise) Asia has given up a search for the practice of local hybridity, that is to say of dialogue and admixture between adjacent and overlapping cultures. There is a need to generate such local hybridity for the sake of

generating a strong Asian contemporary aesthetic. This may assist in shaking off the image of Asia as a place of the past, as something rightly displaced by modernity, as somewhere that cannot speak to or with the contemporary world.

Ganapati emerged out of an investigation into Koodiyattam music as a text. A few years down the road we are using this background of rhythm to interact with Chhanda Shastra experts, to enhance our understanding of rhythm and how it can be used further to supply us with aural images.

Additionally knowledges emerging from an investigation into these two are linking up with the Noh performer's expositions that the text of Noh poetry is marked by pauses for breath, which are distinct from the pauses for grammar. This is a practice similar to that of Sanskrit poetry, which also has a pause for breath called the yati, and which is distinct from the grammatical pause. In both cases the marked pauses for breath seem to exist so as to facilitate dramatic expression. Extending these findings I wish in the future to assess the precise manner in which breath, text and rhythm are linked in the internal spaces of the performer.

Coming back to the performances.

Brhannala is a contemporary allegory, which uses the image of Arjuna as Brhannala the female impersonator as a metaphor for healing the perceived schism between all the polarities in existence. An exploration of androgyny, the play dramatizes the consequences that accompany a dissolution of the rigid categories of sex, showing how a principled refusal of the binary opposition male/female brings down with it all other polarities of time/space, reason/emotion, human/animal, right/left, us/them, self/other.

I mention now some of the thoughts which contributed towards the making of the play.

The Draupadi Cult in Tamil Nadu relates Arjuna as Brhannala to Siva as Ardhnarishwara – the Lord who is half woman and half man. Both Brhannalla and Ardhnarishwara are great dancers, both combine feminine and masculine elements, both have extremely heroic natures, but can be ascetics; both have strong cerebral Brahmin characteristics as well as the warrior moods. Ashis Nandy in the Intimate Enemy says "The Brahmin in his cerebral, self denying asceticism was the traditional masculine counterpoint to the more violent, 'virile' active Kshatriya, the latter representing -----however odd this may seem to the modern consciousness ---the feminine principle in the cosmos".

Arjuna also seems to be related to Siva as Ardhnarishwara through his name Savyasachin – which means one who is ambidextrous. For Arjuna as Savyasachin knows how to use both his left hand, which is feminine and right hand, which is masculine.

Brain lateralisation theories in turn connect Siva as Ardhnarishwara to Arjuna as Savyasachin, when they talk of the right hand as the male and the left hand as the female, and divide functions, capacities and processes of knowledge to different sides of the brain- right and left. Hence art, intuition, metaphor, music are the functions of the left

hand because they process information in spatial terms; and physics , rationality , words , logic , war are functions of the right hand as they process information through time.

While the Greek myths of Prometheus , Mnemosyne , the birth of Athena and the antagonism between the two brothers Apollo and Dionysus explain the evolutionary process by which these polarities came into being --the concept of Ardhnarishwara, Brhannalla and also Arjuna/ Savyasachin who is ambidextrous, point towards a union of polarities.

The discoveries of contemporary scientists and philosophers: Einstein's space/time continuum, Bohr's theory of complementarity, Sri Aurobindo's Gnosis: support the metaphor for the union of polarities which these symbolic figures from the tradition represent; and suggest that these images are merely forerunners of a new way to think about reality.

As I mentioned earlier the performance came out of an understanding of the breath techniques used by Koodiyattam performers to stimulate particular emotions and then express them in the face. My pre occupation was to extend this practice of breath into all forms of expression and to take it beyond that of mere facial expression. Thus I explored ways by which not only would emotion be stimulated but also that the body, voice, face be expressive through the technique of breath. And the entire performance of *Brhannala* therefore was informed by a technique of breath. Whether the performer, Vinay Kumar, was making a transition from one thought to the other or was physically expressing something with his body or with his voice or imbuing a theatrical moment with an inner dimension--it was breath and its rhythms, which lay behind it all.

Another traditional learning which impacted the vocabulary of the performance was Kalaripayattu. Long years of work in the form, which has been absorbed and internalized emerged spontaneously to meet the needs of expression in this performance.

To give you a sense of this I will show you the first scene of *Brhannala*, which opens on Savyasachin. And then moves on to the entry of Brhannala into the court of Virata. (First scene of Brhannala }

A word now about the structure of the performance. I believe that if live performance has to remain valid as an art form, it must reflect the protean nature of the contemporary perception of truth and reality in its form and not only its content. It must try to bring out the simultaneity of its multiple-sightedness, its tangled dynamism, through the very form and structure of expression. And this I believe can best be done by employing as many modes of expression as possible to act as texts or as signifiers of content within a totality that would be a formal metaphor. In *Brhannala* there were three such texts: aural images, physical images and verbal text; and each tried to portray the concern from their own perspective.

I shall show you an extract of the performance as an illustration of this.

In this scene Dronacharya is taking a class in the science of warfare with the Kuru children. The scene tries to capture the analytical and temporal processes of the left- brain and its “male” character {Drona the cerebral Brahmin epitomizes this “ male” element}.The music, the rhythm of the voice, the content of the text and the way the space is used, convey the character of the left-brain ---but each in its own way. (Drona Scene.)

Inspired by the use of music and rhythm in Koodiyattam, *Ganapati* used rhythm as a text/ signifier. The performance was structured in a recurring motif of creation, celebration, destruction and return, which parallel's the motif in the birth stories of Ganapati and Martanda; Ganapati's predecessor from the Vedic Cycle.

As rituals commemorate myths the performance opened with the ritual creation of an image of Ganapati, by a group of artisans for the annual festival. It then went on to show their participation in the Festival's celebrations and its aftermath when the icon is sent away to be immersed in the sea, only to be recreated the next year. In the play this return is suggested by a re-telling of the myth repeatedly and from different points of view. The aim is to allow its main concern, that of creations and creativity, to be interpreted at a variety of different levels. For instance the Ganapati birth stories deal with the socio-cultural dimensions of creations and creativity when they impart value to the notions of hybridity and make approving references to 'tradition' accommodating the 'new' and the 'revolutionary'. Likewise they also deal with the biological, artistic, psychological and spiritual dimensions of creations and creativity.

I end this paper by showing a few extracts from the performance. I begin with an extract which shows the creation of the image by the craftspersons, the celebration and its aftermath. The telling of the myth and its cultural interpretation—as a metaphor for the accommodation of the new by tradition.

The second extract reinforces Ganapati as an image for the hybrid.

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